

Her Jazz

by Huggy Bear

Inspired by riot grrrl, a mixed-gender band fire up the UK's mid-'90s indie scene. "It wasn't anthemic by accident..."

"THIS is happening without your permission", sang Huggy Bear on their inspiring 1993 single, a call to arms that also summed up their approach to music, politics and popular culture. The assorted band members met haphazardly – at school, college and C86 shows – before forming a group based on their shared love of American indie and a desire to create an alternative culture rooted in new means of expression. They wanted to upset the old order – setting themselves a three-year time limit to achieve this. Setting out their stall early on, the band's three women and two man lineup sang about the "boy-girl revolution", refused interviews and photographs, recorded their music – a combination of punk and avant-garde – under pseudonyms.

"We were so drawn to and inspired by music from Olympia and riot grrrl – the

music, the ideas, everything, it was so positive and beautiful," says singer and bassist Niki Eliot. "It affected everything we did from that point on, aesthetically and thematically. We wanted to challenge official narratives, find our own excitement, our own version of feminism, of punk, of love. To create safe spaces for everyone and play the most fiery shows we could. The Beastie Boys referencing 'Her Jazz' in their song 'The Scoop' was more precious than a thousand good reviews."

While their fierce dedication to DIY culture and feminist principles made them a target for some quarters of the music press, "Her Jazz" became a banner under which other motivated misfits could gather. After Huggy Bear performed a ferocious version of the song on *The Word*, chaos ensued when the band and their friends heckled host Terry Christian following an interview with a pair of *Playboy* models. The performance and its aftermath created a memorable TV

moment that took the message of riot grrrl into the mainstream, although it led to a bruising UK tour with Bikini Kill. True to their word, Huggy Bear split after three years, their optimism and youthful energy drained by the reaction their message received. But musically and politically, Huggy Bear were ahead of their time: "Her Jazz" remains as urgent and exciting today as it was in 1993. **PETER WATTS**

JONSLADE: In the early days, Chris [Rowley] wrote a lot of lyrics. Me and Jo [Johnson] were living in Brighton, the others were in London, so we'd write letters to each other. That's how "Her Jazz" came about. Chris did the initial lyrics and then Jo and Niki [Eliot] went to work on it in Brighton while me and Chris were working on another song upstairs.

NIKI ELIOT: Jo came up with a riff and played it to me as a home demo. It kind of sounded like Babes In Toyland's "He's My Thing".

JO JOHNSON: My memory is that it was effortless and written fast. It was fun to play. Niki's performance in the studio and live was just volcanic.

SLADE: We came down all enthusiastic about our song but they had already recorded this version of "Her Jazz" on a four-track. It sounded really good. The other songs weren't dancers. They have poetry and anger and energy. "Her Jazz" had all that but sounded like a club tune.

ELIOT: Chris had written something, part story/part lyrics, then we developed some lyrics together. He came up with the celebratory title.

KEY PLAYERS



Niki Eliot (vocal, bass)



Jo Johnson (guitar)



Jon Slade (guitar)



Chris Rowley (vocals, percussion)



Gary Walker (Wiiijarecords)



Ian Shaw (producer)



Liz Naylor (Catcall)



"Just volcanic": Chris, Niki and Jo play a Huggy Bear gig at west London's Subterania, March 1993



CHRIS ROWLEY: I remember writing the lyrics as a woodcut series of images, a carved and whorled lino-print narrative series that we turned into the lyrics and story.

ELIOT: We traded lines like Chris's "post-tension realisation" – such a Chris thing to say – then me, "this is happening without your permission". Playing it together, we started making these dynamics happen, the stop-start sections, Karen's pounding rhythms. It felt powerful, instinctive and had power compared to our early music. It was also fun. It was a turning point for us. We wanted change and it felt possible with this song.

JOHNSON: It wasn't anthemic by accident... We were aware and saw the silly side of that. We wrote "tacky theme tune" on the EP artwork and got the engineer to scratch "Kathy Acker Bilk" on the run-out groove.

GARY WALKER: I was running Wiiiija out of the Rough Trade shop. Chris, Niki, Jon and Jo were customers and people I'd see at shows. One day Chris and Niki gave me the Huggy Bear demo tape and the energy, the songs and boy-girl dynamic was amazing. We asked them to do a single – "Rubbing The Impossible To Burst".

"The music press hated feminism and punk being connected and celebrated together" NIKI ELIOT

IAN SHAW: I began to record them from their "Kiss Curl For The Kid's Lib Guerrillas" EP. Granny's Studio was in Fulham on the North End Road. It used to be where Beggars Banquet had their office and record shop. They were the cool kids. The funniest session was when Nick Heyward came to the studio. They were quite big fans, so they were quite shy around him.

ROWLEY: I remember at the time that Ian seemed like the most unlikely candidate to be dealing with our shenanigans. But he proved to be most patient, affable, good humoured and able to put our very visual requests into some kind of audio logic.

WALKER: Ian had a fairly traditional approach to recording and that served the band really well. "Her Jazz" is not a lo-fi record. He knew how to record and mix guitar music and was fairly sympathetic.

SHAW: They always wanted masses

of distortion. All the lights on the desk were flashing when we mixed those records.

ELIOT: I remember me, Chris and Jo yelling our heads off into the mic together. Layers of harmonies and shouts, drumsticks dragged and rattled on the rim of the snare, finger snaps, hand claps, rolling empty Coke cans across the floor, dropping coins to add drama and create a feeling of being in a gang, getting ready for a fight, a protest. We loved the Specials and Dexys and the Ramones. In that song we were aiming for something that sounded collective and multi-voiced.

SHAW: It was important to catch the aggression and the energy of what they were trying to do. They were good singers and Jo was a great rhythm guitarist. Together they made a really good sound. They were writing these very interesting songs with a lot of anger and a lot of humour.

ROWLEY: We hadn't come into the music world to play by its rules and regulations – and they were in a state so why would we? We loved music, loved culture, loved possibility and wanted to put our dent into that. It was us against the old bloke network, the Jeremy Clarkson world, the *Loaded* lads mag world.

ELIOT: The music press hated feminism and punk being connected and celebrated together. They hated the way we looked, because we weren't polished and professional. They just thought we didn't deserve to be there, so things got very twisted. I like the fact Collapsed Lung said they wouldn't work with Wiiiija if we were on the label.

LIZ NAYLOR: I went to see Huggy Bear and fell in love with the energy. They were extraordinary and precocious people. They were cultural magpies, bringing in films and music and politics and culture. It was music at its best, provoking and educating.

WALKER: I was ready to put out "Her Jazz". But I played it to Liz and we felt in the spirit of co-operation we'd make it a joint release with Catcall.

NAYLOR: I'm not sure what he told you, but I rather drunkenly told Gary I'd break his legs if he didn't let me ►

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